

Part VI: Wages

Chapter Nineteen

The Transformation of the Value (and Respective Price) of Labour-Power into Wages

On the surface of bourgeois society the wage of the labourer appears as the price of labour, a certain quantity of money that is paid for a certain quantity of labour. Thus people speak of the value of labour and call its expression in money its necessary or natural price. On the other hand they speak of the market-prices of labour, i.e., prices oscillating above or below its natural price.

But what is the value of a commodity? The objective form of the social labour expended in its production. And how do we measure the quantity of this value? By the quantity of the labour contained in it. How then is the value, e.g., of a 12 hour working-day to be determined? By the 12 working-hours contained in a working-day of 12 hours, which is an absurd tautology. [1]

In order to be sold as a commodity in the market, labour must at all events exist before it is sold. But, could the labourer give it an independent objective existence, he would sell a commodity and not labour. [2]

Apart from these contradictions, a direct exchange of money, i.e., of realized labour, with living labour would either do away with the law of value which only begins to develop itself freely on the basis of capitalist production, or do away with capitalist production itself, which rests directly on wage-labour. The working-day of 12 hours embodies itself, e.g., in a money-value of 6s. Either equivalents are exchanged, and then the labourer receives 6s, for 12 hours' labour; the price of his labour would be equal to the price of his product. In this case he produces no surplus-value for the buyer of his labour, the 6s. are not transformed into capital, the basis of capitalist production vanishes. But it is on this very basis that he sells his labour and that his labour is wage-labour. Or else he receives for 12 hours' labour less than 6s., i.e., less than 12 hours' labour. Twelve hours' labour are exchanged against 10, 6, &c., hours' labour. This equalization of unequal quantities not merely

does away with the determination of value. Such a self-destructive contradiction cannot be in any way even enunciated or formulated as a law. [3]

It is of no avail to deduce the exchange of more labour against less, from their difference of form, the one being realized, the other living. [4] This is the more absurd as the value of a commodity is determined not by the quantity of labour actually realized in it, but by the quantity of living labour necessary for its production. A commodity represents, say, 6 working-hours. If an invention is made by which it can be produced in 3 hours, the value, even of the commodity already produced, falls by half. It represents now 3 hours of social labour instead of the 6 formerly necessary. It is the quantity of labour required for its production, not the realized form of that labour, by which the amount of the value of a commodity is determined.

That which comes directly face to face with the possessor of money on the market, is in fact not labour, but the labourer. What the latter sells is his labour-power. As soon as his labour actually begins, it has already ceased to belong to him; it can therefore no longer be sold by him. Labour is the substance, and the immanent measure of value, but has itself no value. [5]

In the expression "value of labour," the idea of value is not only completely obliterated, but actually reversed. It is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth. These imaginary expressions, arise, however, from the relations of production themselves. They are categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations. That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy. [6]

Classical Political Economy borrowed from every-day life the category "price of labour" without further criticism, and then simply asked the question, how is this price determined? It soon recognized that the change in the relations of demand and supply explained in regard to the price of labour, as of all other commodities, nothing except its changes i.e., the oscillations of the market-price above or below a certain mean. If demand and supply balance, the oscillation of prices ceases, all other conditions remaining the same. But then demand and supply also cease to explain anything. The price of labour, at the moment when demand and supply are in equilibrium, is its natural price, determined independently of the relation of demand and supply. And how this price is determined is just the question. Or a larger period of oscillations in the market-price is taken, e.g., a year, and they are found to cancel one the other, leaving a mean average quantity, a relatively constant magnitude. This had naturally to be determined otherwise than by its own compensating variations. This price which always finally predominates over the accidental market-prices of labour and regulates them, this "necessary price"

(Physiocrats) or "natural price" of labour (Adam Smith) can, as with all other commodities, be nothing else than its value expressed in money. In this way Political Economy expected to penetrate athwart the accidental prices of labour, to the value of labour. As with other commodities, this value was determined by the cost of production. But what is the cost of production-of the labourer, i.e., the cost of producing or reproducing the labourer himself? This question unconsciously substituted itself in Political Economy for the original one; for the search after the cost of production of labour as such turned in a circle and never left the spot. What economists therefore call value of labour, is in fact the value of labour-power, as it exists in the personality of the labourer, which is as different from its function, labour, as a machine is from the work it performs. Occupied with the difference between the market-price of labour and its so-called value, with the relation of this value to the rate of profit, and to the values of the commodities produced by means of labour, &c., they never discovered that the course of the analysis had led not only from the market-prices of labour to its presumed value, but had led to the resolution of this value of labour itself into the value of labour-power. Classical economy never arrived at a consciousness of the results of its own analysis; it accepted uncritically the categories "value of labour," "natural price of labour," &c., as final and as adequate expressions for the value-relation under consideration, and was thus led, as will be seen later, into inextricable confusion and contradiction, while it offered to the vulgar economists a secure basis of operations for their shallowness, which on principle worships appearances only.

Let us next see how value (and price) of labour-power, present themselves in this transformed condition as wages.

We know that the daily value of labour-power is calculated upon a certain length of the labourer's life, to which, again, corresponds a certain length of working-day. Assume the habitual working-day as 12 hours, the daily value of labour-power as 3s., the expression in money of a value that embodies 6 hours of labour. If the labourer receives 3s., then he receives the value of his labour-power functioning through 12 hours. If, now, this value of a day's labour-power is expressed as the value of a day's labour itself, we have the formula: Twelve hours' labour has a value of 3s. The value of labour-power thus determines the value of labour, or, expressed in money, its necessary price. If, on the other hand, the price of labour-power differs from its value, in like manner the price of labour differs from its so-called value.

As the value of labour is only an irrational expression for the value of labour-power, it follows, of course, that the value of labour must always be less than the value it produces, for the capitalist always makes labour-power work longer than is necessary for the reproduction of its own value. In the above example, the value of

the labour-power that functions through 12 hours is 3s., a value for the reproduction of which 6 hours are required. The value which the labour-power produces is, on the other hand, 6s., because it, in fact, functions during 12 hours, and the value it produces depends, not on its own value, but on the length of time it is in action. Thus, we have a result absurd at first sight that labour which creates a value of 6s. possesses a value of 3s. [7]

We see, further: The value of 3s. by which a part only of the working-day-i.e., 6 hours' labour-is paid for, appears as the value or price of the whole working-day of 12 hours, which thus includes 6 hours unpaid for. The wage-form thus extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labour and surplus-labour, into paid and unpaid labour. All labour appears as paid labour. In the *corvée*, the labour of the worker for himself, and his compulsory labour for his lord, differ in space and time in the clearest possible way. In slave labour, even that part of the working-day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of existence, in which, therefore, in fact, he works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All the slave's labour appears as unpaid labour. [8] In wage labour, on the contrary, even surplus-labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid. There the property-relation conceals the labour of the slave for himself; here the money-relation conceals the unrequited labour of the wage labourer.

Hence, we may understand the decisive importance of the transformation of value and price of labour-power into the form of wages, or into the value and price of labour itself. This phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all the juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalistic mode of production, of all its illusions as to liberty, of all the apologetic shifts of the vulgar economists.

If history took a long time to get at the bottom of the mystery of wages, nothing, on the other hand, is more easy to understand than the necessity, the *raison d'être*, of this phenomenon.

The exchange between capital and labour at first presents itself to the mind in the same guise as the buying and selling of all other commodities. The buyer gives a certain sum of money, the seller an article of a nature different from money. The jurist's consciousness recognizes in this, at most, a material difference, expressed in the juridically equivalent formula: "*Do ut des, do ut facias, facio ut des, facio ut facias.*" [9]

Furthermore, exchange-value and use-value, being intrinsically incommensurable magnitudes, the expressions "value of labour," "price of labour," do not seem more

irrational than the expressions "value of cotton," "price of cotton." Moreover, the labourer is paid after he has given his labour. In its function of means of payment, money realizes subsequently the value or price of the article supplied-i.e., in this particular case, the value or price of the labour supplied. Finally, the use-value supplied by the labourer to the capitalist is not, in fact, his labour-power, but its function, some definite useful labour, the work of tailoring, shoemaking, spinning, &c. That this same labour is, on the other hand, the universal value-creating element, and thus possesses a property by which it differs from all other commodities, is beyond the cognizance of the ordinary mind.

Let us put ourselves in the place of the labourer who receives for 12 hours' labour, say the value produced by 6 hours' labour, say 3s. For him, in fact, his 12 hours' labour is the means of buying the 3s. The value of his labour-power may vary, with the value of his usual means of subsistence, from 3 to 4 shillings, or from 3 to 2 shillings; or, if the value of his labour-power remains constant, its price may, in consequence of changing relations of demand and supply, rise to 4s. or fall to 2s. He always gives 12 hours of labour. Every change in the amount of the equivalent that he receives appears to him, therefore, necessarily as a change in the value or price of his 12 hours' work. This circumstance misled Adam Smith, who treated the working-day as a constant quantity, [10] to the assertion that the value of labour is constant, although the value of the means of subsistence may vary, and the same working-day, therefore, may represent itself in more or less money for the labourer.

Let us consider, on the other hand, the capitalist. He wishes to receive as much labour as possible for as little money as possible. Practically, therefore, the only thing that interests him is the difference between the price of labour-power and the value which its function creates. But, then, he tries to buy all commodities as cheaply as possible, and always accounts for his profit by simple cheating, by buying under, and selling over the value. Hence, he never comes to see that, if such a thing as the value of labour really existed, and he really paid this value, no capital would exist, his money would not be turned into capital.

Moreover, the actual movement of wages presents phenomena which seem to prove that not the value of labour-power is paid, but the value of its function, of labour itself. We may reduce these phenomena to two great classes: 1.) Change of wages with the changing length of the working-day. One might as well conclude that not the value of a machine is paid, but that of its working, because it costs more to hire a machine for a week than for a day. 2.) The individual difference in the wages of different labourers who do the same kind of work. We find this individual difference, but are not deceived by it, in the system of slavery, where, frankly and openly, without any circumlocution, labour-power itself is sold. Only, in the slave system, the advantage of a labour-power above the average, and the

disadvantage of a labour-power below the average, affects the slave-owner; in the wage-labour system, it affects the labourer himself, because his labour-power is, in the one case, sold by himself, in the other, by a third person.

For the rest, in respect to the phenomenal form, "value and price of labour," or "wages," as contrasted with the essential relation manifested therein, viz., the value and price of labour-power, the same difference holds that holds in respect to all phenomena and their hidden substratum. The former appear directly and spontaneously as current modes of thought; the latter must first be discovered by science. Classical Political Economy nearly touches the true relation of things, without, however, consciously formulating it. This it cannot, so long as it sticks in its bourgeois skin.

Chapter Twenty

Time-Wages

Wages themselves again take many forms, a fact not recognizable in the ordinary economic treatises which, exclusively interested in the material side of the question, neglect every difference of form. An exposition of all these forms however, belongs to the special study of wage labour, not therefore to this work. Still the two fundamental forms must be briefly worked out here.

The sale of labour-power, as will be remembered, takes place for a definite period of time. The converted form under which the daily, weekly, &c., value of labour-power presents itself, is hence that of time wages, therefore day-wages, &c.

Next it is to be noted that the laws set forth, in the 17th chapter, on the changes in the relative magnitudes of price of labour-power and surplus-value, pass by a simple transformation of form, into laws of wages. Similarly the distinction between the exchange-value of labour power, and the sum of the necessities of life into which this value is converted, now reappears as the distinction between nominal and real wages. It would be useless to repeat here, with regard to the phenomenal form, what has been already worked out in the substantial form. We limit ourselves therefore to a few points characteristic of time-wages.

The sum of money [1] which the labourer receives for his daily or weekly labour, forms the amount of his nominal wages, or of his wages estimated in value. But it is

clear that according to the length of the working-day, that is, according to the amount of actual labour daily supplied, the same daily or weekly wage may represent very different prices of labour, i.e., very different sums of money for the same quantity of labour. [2] We must, therefore, in considering time-wages, again distinguish between the sum-total of the daily or weekly wages, &tc., and the price of labour. How then, to find this price, i.e., the money-value of a given quantity of labour? The average price of labour is found, when the average daily value of the labour-power is divided by the average number of hours in the working-day. If, e.g., the daily value of labour-power is 3 shillings, the value of the product of 6 working-hours, and if the working-day is 12 hours, the price of 1 working hour is $3/12$ shillings = 3d. The price of the working-hour thus found serves as the unit measure for the price of labour.

It follows, therefore, that the daily and weekly wages, &tc., may remain the same, although the price of labour falls constantly. If, e.g., the habitual working-day is 10 hours and the daily value of the labour-power 3s., the price of the working-hour is $3/5$ d. It falls to 3s. as soon as the working-day rises to 12 hours, to $2\frac{2}{5}$ d as soon as it rises to 15 hours. Daily or weekly wages remain, despite all this, unchanged. On the contrary, the daily or weekly wages may rise, although the price of labour remains constant or even falls. If, e.g., the working-day is 10 hours, and the daily value of labour-power 3 shillings, the price of one working-hour is $3/5$ d. If the labourer, in consequence of increase of trade, works 12 hours, the price of labour remaining the same, his daily wage now rises to 3 shillings $7\frac{1}{5}$ d. without any variation in the price of labour. The same result might follow if, instead of the extensive amount of labour, its intensive amount increased. [3] The rise of the nominal daily or weekly wages may therefore be accompanied by a price of labour that remains stationary or falls. The same holds as to the income of the labourer's family, as soon as the quantity of labour expended by the head of the family is increased by the labour of the members of his family. There are, therefore, methods of lowering the price of labour independent of the reduction of the nominal daily or weekly wages. [4]

As a general law it follows that, given the amount of daily or weekly labour, &tc., the daily or weekly wages depend on the price of labour which itself varies either with the value of labour-power, or with the difference between its price and its value. Given, on the other hand, the price of labour, the daily or weekly wages depend on the quantity of the daily or weekly labour.

The unit-measure for time-wages, the price of the working-hour, is the quotient of the value of a day's labour-power, divided by the number of hours of the average working-day. Let the latter be 12 hours, and the daily value of labour-power 3 shillings, the value of the product of 6 hours of labour. Under these circumstances

the price of a working hour is 3d.; the value produced in it is 6d. If the labourer is now employed less than 12 hours (or less than 6 days in the week), e.g., only 6 or 8 hours, he receives, with this price of labour, only 2s. or 1s. 6d. a day. [5] As on our hypothesis he must work on the average 6 hours daily, in order to produce a day's wage corresponding merely to the value of his labour power, as according to the same hypothesis he works only half of every hour for himself, and half for the capitalist, it is clear that he cannot obtain for himself the value of the product of 6 hours if he is employed less than 12 hours. In previous chapters we saw the destructive consequences of over-work; here we find the sources of the sufferings that result to the labourer from his insufficient employment.

If the hour's wage is fixed so that the capitalist does not bind himself to pay a day's or a week's wage, but only to pay wages for the hours during which he chooses to employ the labourer, he can employ him for a shorter time than that which is originally the basis of the calculation of the hour-wage, or the unit-measure of the price of labour. Since this unit is determined by the ratio

$$\frac{\text{daily value of labour-power}}{\text{working-day of a given number of hours}}$$

it, of course, loses all meaning as soon as the working-day ceases to contain a definite number of hours. The connection between the paid and the unpaid labour is destroyed. The capitalist can now wring from the labour a certain quantity of surplus-labour without allowing him the labour-time necessary for his own subsistence. He can annihilate all regularity of employment, and according to his own convenience, caprice, and the interest of the moment, make the most enormous over-work alternate with relative or absolute cessation of work. He can, under the pretense of paying "the normal price of labour," abnormally lengthen the working-day without any corresponding compensation to the labourer. Hence the perfectly rational revolt in 1860 of the London labourers, employed in the building trades, against the attempt of the capitalists to impose on them this sort of wage by the hour. The legal limitation of the working-day puts an end to such mischief, although not, of course, to the diminution of employment caused by the competition of machinery, by changes in the quality of the labourers employed, and by crises partial or general.

With an increasing daily or weekly wage the price of labour may remain nominally constant, and yet may fall below its normal level. This occurs every time that, the price of labour (reckoned per working-hour) remaining constant, the working-day is prolonged beyond its customary length. If in the fraction:

daily value of labour power

working-day

the denominator increases, the numerator increases yet more rapidly. The value of labour-power, as dependent on its wear and tear, increases with the duration of its functioning, and in more rapid proportion than the increase of that duration. In many branches of industry where time-wage is the general rule without legal limits to the working-time, the habit has, therefore, spontaneously grown up of regarding the working day as normal only up to a certain point, e.g., up to the expiration of the tenth hour ("normal working-day," "the day's work," "the regular hours of work"). Beyond this limit the working-time is over-time, and is, taking the hour as unit-measure, paid better ("extra pay"), although often in a proportion ridiculously small. [6] The normal working-day exists here as a fraction of the actual working-day, and the latter, often during the whole year, lasts longer than the former. [7] The increase in the price of labour with the extension of the working-day beyond a certain normal limit, takes such a shape in various British industries that the low price of labour during the so-called normal time compels the labourer to work during the better paid over-time, if he wishes to obtain a sufficient wage at all. [8] Legal limitation of the working-day puts an end to these amenities. [9]

It is a fact generally known that, the longer the working-days, in any branch of industry, the lower are the wages. [10] A. Redgrave, factory inspector, illustrates this by a comparative review of the 20 years from 1839-1859, according to which wages rose in the factories under the 10 Hours Law, whilst they fell in the factories in which the work lasted 14 to 15 hours daily. [11]

From the law, "the price of labour being given, the daily or weekly wage depends on the quantity of labour expended," it follows, first of all, that the lower the price of labour, the greater must be the quantity of labour, or the longer must be the working-day for the labourer to secure even a miserable average wage. The lowness of the price of labour acts here as a stimulus to the extension of the labour-time. [12]

On the other hand, the extension of the working-time produces, in its turn, a fall in the price of labour, and with this a fall in the day's or week's wages.

The determination of the price of labour by:

daily value of labour power

working day of a given number of hours

shows that a mere prolongation of the working-day lowers the price of labour, if no compensation steps in. But the same circumstances which allow the capitalist in the long run to prolong the working-day, also allow him first, and compel him finally, to nominally lower the price of labour until the total price of the increased number of hours is lowered, and, therefore, the daily or weekly wage. Reference to two circumstances is sufficient here. If one man does the work of 1 1/2 or 2 men, the supply of labour increases, although the supply of labour-power on the market remains constant. The competition thus created between the labourers allows the capitalist to beat down the price of labour, whilst the falling price of labour allows him, on the other hand, to screw up still further the working-time. [13] Soon, however, this command over abnormal quantities of unpaid labour, i.e., quantities in excess of the average social amount, becomes a source of competition amongst the capitalists themselves. A part of the price of the commodity consists of the price of labour. The unpaid part of the labour-price need not be reckoned in the price of the commodity. It may be presented to the buyer. This is the first step to which competition leads. The second step to which it drives is to exclude also from the selling price of the commodity at least a part of the abnormal surplus-value created by the extension of the working-day. In this way, an abnormally low selling price of the commodity arises, at first sporadically, and becomes fixed by degrees; a lower selling price which henceforward becomes the constant basis of a miserable wage for an excessive working-time, as originally it was the product of these very circumstances. This movement is simply indicated here, as the analysis of competition does not belong to this part of our subject. Nevertheless, the capitalist may, for a moment, speak for himself. "In Birmingham there is so much competition of masters one against another that many are obliged to do things as employers that they would otherwise be ashamed of; and yet no more money is made, but only the public gets the benefit." [14] The reader will remember the two sorts of London bakers, of whom one sold the bread at its full price (the "full-priced" bakers), the other below its normal price ("the under-priced," "the undersellers"). The "full-priced" denounced their rivals before the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry: "They only exist now by first defrauding the public, and next getting 18 hours' work out of their men for 12 hours' wages.... The unpaid labour of the men was made ... the source whereby the competition was carried on, and continues so to this day.... The competition among the master bakers is the cause of the difficulty in getting rid of night-work. An underseller, who sells his bread below the cost-price according to the price of flour, must make it up by getting more out of the labour of the men.... If I got only 12 hours' work out of my men, and my neighbor got 18 or 20, he must beat me in the selling price. If the men could insist on payment for over-work, this would be set right.... A large number of those employed by the undersellers are foreigners and youths, who are obliged to accept almost any wages they can obtain." [15]

This jeremiad is also interesting because it shows how the appearance only of the relations of production mirrors itself in the brain of the capitalist. The capitalist does not know that the normal price of labour also includes a definite quantity of unpaid labour, and that this very unpaid labour is the normal source of his gain. The category of surplus labour-time does not exist at all for him, since it is included in the normal working-day, which he thinks he has paid for in the day's wages. But over-time does exist for him, the prolongation of the working-day beyond the limits corresponding with the usual price of labour. Face to face with his underselling competitor, he even insists upon extra pay for this over-time. He again does not know that this extra pay includes unpaid labour, just as well as does the price of the customary hour of labour. For example, the price of one hour of the 12 hours' working-day is 3d., say the value-product of half a working-hour, whilst the price of the over-time working-hour is 4d., or the value-product of 2/3 of a working hour. In the first case the capitalist appropriates to himself one-half, in the second, one-third of the working-hour without paying for it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Piece-Wages

Wages by the piece are nothing else than a converted form of wages by time, just as wages by time are a converted form of the value or price of labour-power.

In piece-wages it seems at first sight as if the use-value bought from the labourer was, not the function of his labour-power, living labour, but labour already realized in the product, and as if the price of this labour was determined, not as with time-wages, by the fraction

$$\frac{\text{daily value of labour-power}}{\text{the working day of a given number of hours}}$$

but by the capacity for work of producer. [1]

The confidence that trusts in this appearance ought to receive a first severe shock from the fact that both forms of wages exist side by side, simultaneously, in the same branches of industry; e.g., "the compositors of London, as a general rule, work

by the piece, time-work being the exception, while those in the country work by the day, the exception being work by the piece. The shipwrights of the port of London work by the job or piece, while those of all other parts work by the day." [2]

In the same saddlery shops of London, often for the same work, piece-wages are paid to the French, time-wages to the English. In the regular factories in which throughout piece-wages predominate, particular kinds of work are unsuitable to this form of wage, and are therefore paid by time. [3] But it is, moreover, self-evident that the difference of form in the payment of wages alters in no way their essential nature, although the one form may be more favorable to the development of capitalist production than the other.

Let the ordinary working-day contain 12 hours of which 6 are paid, 6 unpaid. Let its value-product be 6 shillings, that of one hour's labour therefore 6d. Let us suppose that, as the result of experience, a labourer who works with the average amount of intensity and skill, who, therefore, gives in fact only the time socially necessary to the production of an article, supplies in 12 hours 24 pieces, either distinct products or measurable parts of a continuous whole. Then the value of these 24 pieces, after subtraction of the portion of constant capital contained in them, is 6 shillings, and the value of a single piece 3d. The labourer receives 1 1/2d. per piece, and thus earns in 12 hours 3 shillings. Just as, with time-wages, it does not matter whether we assume that the labourer works 6 hours for himself and 6 hours for the capitalist, or half of every hour for himself, and the other half for the capitalist, so here it does not matter whether we say that each individual piece is half paid, and half unpaid for, or that the price of 12 pieces is the equivalent only of the value of the labour-power, whilst in the other 12 pieces surplus-value is incorporated.

The form of piece-wages is just as irrational as that of time-wages. Whilst in our example two pieces of a commodity, after subtraction of the value of the means of production consumed in them, are worth 6d. as being the product of one hour, the labourer receives for them a price of 3d. Piece-wages do not, in fact, distinctly express any relation of value. It is not, therefore, a question of measuring the value of the piece by the working-time incorporated in it, but on the contrary, of measuring the working-time the labourer has expended by the number of pieces he has produced. In time-wages, the labour is measured by its immediate duration; in piece-wages, by the quantity of products in which the labour has embodied itself during a given time. [4] The price of labour time itself is finally determined by the equation: value of a day's labour = daily value of labour-power. Piece-wage is, therefore, only a modified form of time-wage.

Let us now consider a little more closely the characteristic peculiarities of piece-wages.

The quality of the labour is here controlled by the work itself, which must be of average perfection if the piece-price is to be paid in full. Piece-wages become, from this point of view, the most fruitful source of reductions of wages and capitalistic cheating.

They furnish to the capitalist an exact measure for the intensity of labour. Only the working-time which is embodied in a quantum of commodities determined beforehand, and experimentally fixed, counts as socially necessary working-time, and is paid as such. In the larger workshops of the London tailors, therefore, a certain piece of work, a waistcoat, e.g., is called an hour, or half an hour, the hour at 6d. By practice it is known how much is the average product of one hour. With new fashions, repairs, &c., a contest arises between master and labourer as to whether a particular piece of work is one hour, and so on, until here also experience decides. Similarly in the London furniture workshops, &c. If the labourer does not possess the average capacity, if he cannot in consequence supply a certain minimum of work per day, he is dismissed. [5]

Since the quality and intensity of the work are here controlled by the form of wage itself, superintendence of labour becomes in great part superfluous. Piece-wages therefore lay the foundation of the modern "domestic labour," described above, as well as of a hierarchically organized system of exploitation and oppression. The latter has two fundamental forms. On the one hand, piece-wages facilitate the interposition of parasites between the capitalist and the wage-labourer, the "sub-letting of labour." The gain of these middlemen comes entirely from the difference between the labour-price which the capitalist pays, and the part of that price which they actually allow to reach the labourer. [6] In England this system is characteristically called the "sweating system." On the other hand, piece-wage allows the capitalist to make a contract for so much per piece with the head labourer-in manufactures with the chief of some group, in mines with the extractor of the coal, in the factory with the actual machine-worker — at a price for which the head labourer himself undertakes the enlisting and payment of his assistant work people. The exploitation of the labourer by capital is here effected through the exploitation of the labourer by the labourer. [7]

Given piece-wage, it is naturally the personal interest of the labourer to strain his labour-power as intensely as possible; this enables the capitalist to raise more easily the normal degree of intensity of labour. [8] It is moreover now the personal interest of the labourer to lengthen the working-day, since with it his daily or weekly wages rise. [9] This gradually brings on a reaction like that already described in time-wages, without reckoning that the prolongation of the working-day, even if

the piece wage remains constant, includes of necessity a fall in the price of the labour.

In time-wages, with few exceptions, the same wage holds for the same kind of work, whilst in piece-wages, though the price of the working time is measured by a certain quantity of product, the day's or week's wage will vary with the individual differences of the labourers, of whom one supplies in a given time the minimum of product only, another the average, a third more than the average. With regard to actual receipts there is, therefore, great variety according to the different skill, strength, energy, staying-power, &c., of the individual labourers. [10] Of course this does not alter the general relations between capital and wage-labour. First, the individual differences balance one another in the workshop as a whole, which thus supplies in a given working-time the average product, and the total wages paid will be the average wages of that particular branch of industry. Second, the proportion between wages and surplus-value remains unaltered, since the mass of surplus labour supplied by each particular labourer corresponds with the wage received by him. But the wider scope that piece-wage gives to individuality tends to develop on the one hand that individuality, and with it the sense of liberty, independence, and self-control of the labourers, and on the other, their competition one with another. Piece-work has, therefore, a tendency, while raising individual wages above the average, to lower this average itself. But where a particular rate of piece-wage has for a long time been fixed by tradition, and its lowering, therefore, presented especial difficulties, the masters, in such exceptional cases, sometimes had recourse to its compulsory transformation into time-wages. Hence, e.g., in 1860 a great strike among the ribbon-weavers of Coventry. [11] Piece-wage is finally one of the chief supports of the hour-system described in the preceding chapter. [12]

From what has been shown so far, it follows that piece-wage is the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production. Although by no means new — it figures side by side with time-wages officially in the French and English labour statutes of the 14th century — it only conquers a larger field for action during the period of manufacture, properly so-called. In the stormy youth of modern industry, especially from 1797 to 1815, it served as a lever for the lengthening of the working-day, and the lowering of wages. Very important materials for the fluctuation of wages during that period are to be found in the Blue books: "Report and Evidence from the Select Committee on Petitions respecting the Corn Laws" (Parliamentary Session of 1813-14), and "Report from the Lords' Committee, on the State of the Growth, Commerce, and Consumption of Grain, and all Laws relating thereto" (Session of 1814-15). Here we find documentary evidence of the constant lowering of the price of labour from the beginning of the anti-Jacobin War. In the weaving industry, e.g., piece-wages had fallen so low that, in spite of the very great lengthening of the working-day, the daily wages were then

lower than before. "The real earnings of the cotton weaver are now far less than they were; his superiority over the common labourer, which at first was very great, has now almost entirely ceased. Indeed... the difference in the wages of skillful and common labour is far less now than at any former period." [13] How little the increased intensity and extension of labour through piece-wages benefited the agricultural proletariat, the following passage borrowed from a work on the side of the landlords and farmers shows: "By far the greater part of agricultural operations is done by people who are hired for the day or on piece-work. Their weekly wages are about 12s., and although it may be assumed that a man earns on piece-work under the greater stimulus to labour, 1s. or perhaps 2s. more than on weekly wages, yet it is found, on calculating his total income, that his loss of employment, during the year, outweighs this gain...Further, it will generally be found that the wages of these men bear a certain proportion to the price of the necessary means of subsistence, so that a man with two children is able to bring up his family without recourse to parish relief." [14] Malthus at that time remarked with reference to the facts published by Parliament: "I confess that I see, with misgiving, the great extension of the practice of piece-wage. Really hard work during 12 or 14 hours of the day, or for any longer time, is too much for any human being." [15]

In the workshops under the Factory Acts, piece-wages become the general rule, because capital can there only increase the efficacy of the working-day by intensifying labour. [16]

With the changing productiveness of labour the same quantum of product represents a varying working-time. Therefore, piece-wage also varies, for it is the money expression of a determined working-time. In our example above, 24 pieces were produced in 12 hours, whilst the value of the product of the 12 hours was 6s., the daily value of the labour-power 3s., the price of the labour-hour 3d., and the wage for one piece $1\frac{1}{2}$ d. In one piece half-an-hour's labour was absorbed. If the same working-day now supplies, in consequence of the doubled productiveness of labour, 48 pieces instead of 24, and all other circumstances remain unchanged, then the piece-wage falls from $1\frac{1}{2}$ d. to $\frac{3}{4}$ d., as every piece now only represents $\frac{1}{4}$, instead of $\frac{1}{2}$ of a working-hour. $24 \text{ by } 1\frac{1}{2}\text{d.} = 3\text{s.}$, and in like manner $48 \text{ by } \frac{3}{4}\text{d.} = 3\text{s.}$ In other words, piece-wage is lowered in the same proportion as the number of the pieces produced in the same time rises, [17] and, therefore, as the working time spent on the same piece falls. This change in piece-wage, so far purely nominal, leads to constant battles between capitalist and labour. Either because the capitalist uses it as a pretext for actually lowering the price of labour, or because increased productive power of labour is accompanied by an increased intensity of the same. Or because the labourer takes seriously the appearance of piece-wages (viz., that his product is paid for, and not his labour-power) and therefore revolts against a lowering of wages, unaccompanied by a lowering in the selling price of the

commodity. "The operatives...carefully watch the price of the raw material and the price of manufactured goods, and are thus enabled to form an accurate estimate of their master's profits." [18]

The capitalist rightly knocks on the head such pretensions as gross errors as to the nature of wage-labour. [19] He cries out against this usurping attempt to lay taxes on the advance of industry, and declares roundly that the productiveness of labour does not concern the labourer at all. [20]

Transcribed by Bill McDorman

From: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch19.htm>

And: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch20.htm>

And: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch21.htm>

Course: Marx's Capital, Volume 1

15082, Karl Marx, Capital V1, 1867, C19, 20, 21, Wages

7312 words